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C O N F I D E N T I A L WARSAW 001173

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL AF PL MAPP

SUBJECT: POLES DEEPEN AFGHANISTAN ENGAGEMENT DESPITE PUBLIC
OPPOSITION

REF: A. IIR 6 878 0037 08

1B. IIR 6 878 0015 08

1C. IIR 6 878 0216 08

1D. WARSAW 1093

1E. WARSAW 1140

1F. WARSAW 1010

Classified By: DCM Quanrud for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY. On November 1, Poland will increase its military presence and take on new responsibilities in Afghanistan. Polish forces will consolidate control over military operations in Ghazni province, and a Polish civilian contingent will replace its U.S. PRT counterpart over the course of the coming year. There will likely be immediate military challenges as Taliban fighters look to "knock out" a coalition partner who faces a wary public at home. The Poles are also on a steep learning curve - trying hard to meld civilian participation into their counterinsurgency strategies - and they have not yet identified funding for reconstruction and humanitarian aid. The growing Polish footprint in Afghanistan reflects a determination to bolster NATO and Polish military credibility, backed by FM Radoslaw Sikorski's deep personal convictions. It is also by far the riskiest action to date of the cautious Tusk government. We should be prepared to offer the Poles our insights, aid and encouragement if this activist GoP consensus is to hold. END SUMMARY

12. (C) Always ambitious participants in the ISAF mission, the Poles are preparing to take their engagement to new levels. Throughout their deployment, Polish forces have served without caveats in the areas of South and East Afghanistan where the fighting has been heaviest. They are also lobbying other ISAF partners hard to remove their caveats as an indispensable prerequisite for victory. As FM Sikorski once joked to the Secretary, the Poles are in the awkward position of encouraging the German military to be more aggressive . . . in Afghanistan. Polish troop levels are set to rise 1,200 to 1,600 by November 1; Polish forces will be consolidated in Ghazni, where they will assume responsibility for military operations. In addition, Poland intends to gradually take over the Ghazni PRT from the U.S.

13. (C) Poland's political and military leadership views Afghanistan first and foremost as a test of NATO and - as was the case in Iraq - Poland's reliability as an Ally (reftels A, D). Since NATO (and U.S.) military credibility underwrites the Article V guarantee that is so critical to Poland's homeland defense strategy, alliance failure in Afghanistan is unthinkable. The Poles also see the Afghanistan mission as an opportunity to bolster their defense capabilities. FM Sikorski has told A/S Fried that

experience in Afghanistan will help Poland enhance its homeland defense, reflecting the Poles' perennial preoccupation with Russia.

¶4. (C) The GoP is increasing its contributions in Afghanistan in the face of daunting organizational and political challenges. To date, Polish military commanders have sought to remain closely tied to U.S. forces. They are worried that tying themselves regionally and to a Polish civilian PRT could sever operational connections with U.S. forces, despite U.S. assurances of support (Reftel C). The Poles are also still wrestling with how to mobilize civilians in sufficient numbers and with the financial resources to make a PRT effective (reftel E).

¶5. (C) Perhaps of greatest concern, outside the actual requirements of the deployment, is pervasive negative domestic public opinion: recent polls show that 74 percent "dissatisfaction" with Polish participation in the mission, a number comparable to Iraq levels. The GoP may calculate that opposition to the war is wide but not deep - but public opposition will likely intensify if (or more likely, when) things get ugly. Hence the GoP sensitivity to casualties, and Prime Minister Tusk's August visit to Afghanistan after the deaths of three Polish soldiers by IED attack.

¶6. (C) FM Sikorski's personal engagement spearheads the GoP commitment. Sikorski first traveled to Afghanistan as a journalist in 1987, and witnessed Soviet atrocities first-hand while embedded with the mujahedin. There are unconfirmed stories, widely believed in Poland, that on at least one occasion Sikorski carried a gun and killed Soviet soldiers. An impassioned and authoritative speaker on

Afghanistan, Sikorski is not shy about offering policy prescriptions or even alternatives to President Karzai's leadership. If Polish casualties mount in Afghanistan, Sikorski's ability to maintain GoP support for a high-profile military role will be tested.

¶7. (C) Polish defense ministry officials tell us the U.S. can help the Polish war effort - and bolster Polish public opinion - through intelligence, logistical and material support. All eight military deaths in Afghanistan were the result of IED's, so the GoP greatly appreciates the U.S. decision to lend Mine-Resistant Ambush Protectant (MRAP) vehicles. In addition, the Poles have asked for Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV's) like the Predator. They also argue that their increasingly prominent leadership position within ISAF has earned them a seat on the ISAF Joint Coordination Management Board. As of now, Polish troop levels narrowly miss the numerical criteria for Board membership, although qualitative contributions such as serving without caveats may merit renewed consideration.

¶8. (C) The growing Polish engagement in Afghanistan is the riskiest move yet by a cautious Tusk government bent on preserving political capital for the 2010 presidential elections here. The U.S. should do everything we can to mitigate that risk -- with support and encouragement, Poland can be one of our most energetic and dependable partners against the Taliban. Despite the domestic opposition to the conflict, Poland's political leadership is determined to succeed. In the government's view, the war effort has the strongest strategic rationale: increasing Poland's and NATO's war-fighting capabilities will help manage Poland's greatest threat, an increasingly assertive Russia.

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